

Manifesto (Agenda) for Progressive Education

Educators for Social Justice and Nova Scotia Parents for Public Education

Definition of Progressive Public Education:

We live in a society where socio-economic disparity is increasing. Intergenerational socio-economic mobility is decreasing or stagnant. While our province's prosperity has increased over the last fifty years, and the rich get richer, wages for most people have fallen.

We live in a society which has inherited and still experiences the effects of 300 years of colonialism, slavery, and racial segregation. These factors have contributed to Nova Scotia having one of the highest levels of child poverty in the country, which has become one of the biggest challenges for the education system.

Progressive public education has traditionally been one of the most powerful social programs directed at resisting these trends. Canada has one of the best public education systems in the world, and we believe that we must strengthen it as a program for social justice, and not roll back progress.

Progressive public education is education that helps every child attain the skills and knowledge they need to be lifelong learners and socially responsible citizens in an ever-changing world. These include problem solving, critical thinking, communication, ability to collaborate and empathy. It is predicated on the assumption that every child is unique, and has unique needs and capabilities, both physical, emotional, developmental, social, and intellectual. In addition, each child has a cultural, racial, economic, and gender identity, and progressive public education is designed to prepare them to succeed economically and socially, regardless of their background.

Progressive education requires collaboration on the part of all stakeholders, especially educators both administrators and teachers. It promotes active engagement in their communities by students as well as collaboration between educators, families and government services.

ESJ and NS Parents for Public Education are working together to promote progressive public education in this province. We have identified several challenges to it:

1. Weakening of Community Engagement

Given the importance of community engagement, it is ironic that the Nova Scotia Liberal government has, in the past six years, weakened or destroyed opportunities for public engagement in the education system, concentrating power in the hands of government officials and diminishing or eliminating the institutions of citizen involvement.

It has wiped out elected school boards, left the role of School Advisory Councils undefined, and changed education policy in an arbitrary and high-handed fashion. It has centralized curriculum development and decision making in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and this has resulted in a lack of local input from the regions.

We recommend the following action items to combat the weakening of community engagement:

- **Boost community engagement through restoring regional, elected councils or boards which would have decision-making power over some aspects of curriculum, etc.**
- **Support and augment the role of the School Advisory Councils.**
- **Build relationships with parents and community, including diverse voices - even when they are difficult to find.**
- **Publication 2-3 times per year - reach out to similar groups across the province and country. Share best practices, research etc.**

2. The Impact of Austerity

In order to deliver programs and services citizens need, governments collect revenues and make expenditures. Austerity is a political program that aims to reduce the size and impact of government and governmental institutions by cutting revenues (mostly taxes) and subsequently cutting expenditures (mostly social programs), asserting that it can no longer afford to provide those services.

Education is part of the Nova Scotia government's austerity agenda. This has meant cuts to education, resulting in the inadequate implementation of the inclusion policy, insufficient staff hiring and the less funding for professional development. This has led to the triage of kids with special needs, and long wait times for assessment forcing those with means to pursue private sector solutions while those without means forego attention. It has also meant dwindling supports within the classroom and larger class sizes.

With the erosion of public education due to austerity, creeping privatization occurs as parents with means choose private schools, and parents who have children with disabilities get vouchers for private schools. The centralization of power, a byproduct of austerity, also results in more standardized curriculum materials and tests, which tends to favour corporations such as Pearson, Nelson etc. over locally produced materials.

We recommend the following action items to combat the erosion of our public education by austerity measures

- **Include adequate funding for inclusion, more funding for pedagogical development, adequate maintenance funds for school buildings and salaries that keep up with the NS cost of living and the median salary for employees across Canada. Also keep class sizes to manageable levels.**
- **Advocate for more preparation/collaboration time for teachers**
- **Advocate for meaningful government investment in poverty reduction (raise the minimum wage, increase social assistance, affordable housing initiatives, social programmes etc).**
- **Resist privatization where it occurs eg. private tutoring firms, charter schools, government funding for private schools. Support local curriculum development: groups of teachers work together to develop new courses, PD days working together with consultants - more local, relevant material, alternative curricula**

3. Weakening of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union

This government has attacked the teachers union and eroded collective bargaining. The government has removed the right to strike, restricted the scope of what can be negotiated, and taken the principals and specialists (psychologists and speech/language therapists) out of the union. This has combined to divide and conquer, has made it more difficult for the necessary collaboration among administrators, specialists, and teachers for progressive education to happen.

It has also rendered those positions outside the union less desirable, with fewer protections in place, and less bargaining power to incumbents. This will eventually have an impact on the education system's ability to attract the best people to these positions.

We recommend the following action items to resist the wilful damage to collective bargaining rights for teachers:

- **Advocate for returning to respectful collective bargaining in which employees' charter rights and past agreements are respected.**

- Return the administrators and specialists (above) to the NSTU.
- Advocate collaboration (above) in teacher evaluation - not top down evaluation
- Advocate collaboration (above) in planning, curriculum development etc., creating an environment in which teachers are free to speak out without fear of repercussions
- Advocate for more focus on teacher-centred evaluation of students i.e. less standardized testing
- Include class size as a working condition in collective bargaining
- make education an election issue, be a special interest group, lobby all parties and endorse one. Encourage Individual and collective action - letter writing, political lobbying, supporting other unions.
- Support the NSTU in educating the public about the role of unions and collective action

4. Right wing think tanks and an often hostile media

Think tanks such as AIMS, the Fraser Institute, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and the CD Howe Institute, many of them funded by rich business people and business foundations, have been producing “research” that supports a neo-liberal agenda - the concept that market forces lead to competition that leads to success. The Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) emerged from this neo-liberal agenda. The McNeil government has implemented many of the recommendations of these think tanks and the media tends to promote these points of view (including the idea that the education system is failing and it’s the teachers’ fault). Anti-teacher rhetoric is rife in the media.

We recommend the following action items to reduce the influence of right-wing think tanks:

- Challenge think tanks promoting GERM by sharing evidence-based practices and research produced by more moderate outlets such as the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ontario’s People for Education, the Broadbent Institute and internationally recognized experts (see Publication, above)
- Publish more good news education stories in the mainstream media - i.e. a regular education columnist
- Counteract negative portrayals of educators and misinformation in the media and from government
- Put forward positive messaging about education, e.g. “Teachers are helping to raise your kids” “Public education needs to be great for everyone, not just the rich”

